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Able Archer 83: The Final Round

Able Archer was an official military exercise that NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) ran annually as part of a larger program, Autumn Forge. This simulation tested the abilities of NATO troops in Europe, specifically near the Warsaw Pact, to react to a Defcon 1 or 2 situation with the Soviet Union, or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Although NATO said it was an annual exercise, the start of the exercise on November 2, 1983, nearly pushed the United States and the Soviet Union into the first ever nuclear war, and this crisis lasted from November 2 – November 11, 1983. The leading historian on Able Archer 83, Nate Jones, explains that, “Despite mutually facing the brink of nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis twenty-one years earlier, both countries churned out world-obliterating quantities...and destabilizing new designs...of nuclear weapons” in the 1970s and 1980s.¹ Leading up to and during Able Archer 83, the USSR and the United States “threatened each other with the largest, most destructive, and quickest-striking nuclear arsenal in the history of the world”.² Since a great deal on the events of 1983, especially files on Able Archer 83 and Autumn Forge 82/3, remain classified/top secret, it is difficult to make complete sense of what truly occurred both throughout the year of 1983 and during the period of the 2nd – 11th of November.

The year of 1983 consisted of much miscommunication. First, whatever the reason may have been (some declassified files state that the Warsaw Pact and the USSR truly feared that an

¹ Jones, Nathan. *Able Archer 83: the Secret History of the NATO Exercise That Almost Triggered Nuclear War* (The New Press, 2016), 54.

² Jones, 55.

attack by the West was imminent, while other files state that the Warsaw Pact and the USSR wanted to continue expanding their reach), there was a lot of movement of nuclear weapons—specifically missiles—throughout the Warsaw Pact. The U.S. was no more innocent than the USSR when it came to moving nuclear missiles (for instance, Pershing I and II).³ The United States' large role in NATO allowed it to have a major say in matters like the nuclear weapons; as a result, missiles were unsurprisingly moved around Europe even though European Nuclear Disarmament (END) had started in 1980. END was only one example of the calling for disarmament and nuclear arms reduction. Declassified government files show that the leaders of both the United States and the USSR truly were seeking arms reduction; however, both nations paradoxically continued to build up arms and nuclear protection.

The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) treaties were obviously failing and nearing expiration dates. SALT I was signed in 1972 with the goal of lowering the number of strategic ballistic missiles and strategic submarine-launched ballistic missiles in order to work towards nuclear arms reduction and balance; it also dealt with U.S. and USSR border issues. SALT II—signed in 1979—banned any new missile programs in order to prevent the development of more or new strategic missiles. And yet, as mentioned before, the U.S. and the USSR never truly and whole-heartedly followed through with these treaties, although the treaties would have solved many problems. For instance, the United States chose to go ahead with the Strategic Defense Initiative, “...a plan for a ground- and space-based, laser-armed antiballistic missile system that,

³ Pershing I and II were two-stage, completely fueled, ballistic nuclear missiles part of the United States Army's Weapon System. 1983 was specifically when U.S. Army decided to replace Pershing I with Pershing II, both of which were more than capable of acting as the primary nuclear-weapons in a nuclear arena/war. By moving these around in 1983, the United States was essentially displaying its nuclear arsenal to signify superiority and to potentially remind others of nuclear deterrence.

if deployed, would create a shield for US land-based missiles.”⁴ This understandably struck a Soviet nerve since it was not only an outright and international declaration of the hardline and superior policy which with the United States planned to pursue, but it also showed that the U.S. did not plan to stand by any of the treaties signed in the past for nuclear arms reduction, thus surprising the Kremlin. Then, Korean Airlines Flight 007, a commercial flight, was shot down on September 1, 1983, when it entered Soviet prohibited airspace. At the end of October 1983, Reagan had a private screening of “The Day After”, an ABC TV movie which officially aired on November 20, 1983. In the film, after the years of tension, nuclear missiles from the USSR were released and hit the United States. Lastly, the Pentagon organized a fairly important, official briefing on nuclear war at the end of October/beginning of November, which truly shook President Reagan.

Ultimately, these factors had arguably the largest impact on the context leading up to Able Archer 83. Unsurprisingly, to the Soviets, the U.S. appeared to be on the offensive, and to the United States, the USSR always seemed to be on the defensive. Something had given the USSR the impression that 1983 would be the year that a move was made on the Warsaw Pact; on the other hand, the U.S. appeared to be on the offensive because something had given *it* the impression that the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union were building up military and nuclear weapons and would strike in 1983.⁵ The paranoia, built-up tensions, miscommunications, and *lack* of communication existed in abundance up through Able Archer 83, which is to say that

⁴ Fischer, Benjamin B. “A Cold War Conundrum: The 1983 Soviet War Scare” (*Central Intelligence Agency*, Central Intelligence Agency, 7 July 2008, www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/a-cold-war-conundrum/source.htm), “Star Wars”.

⁵ Jones, 6.

although there were direct methods for politicians, leaders, and military officials to communicate, very few actually spoke straightforwardly and/or openly.⁶

Although the discrepancies on what is known about 1983 are significant, specifically regarding knowledge about Able Archer 83, many other factors such as miscommunication, lack of dialogue, nuclear armament versus nuclear disarmament, and the like affected the states of minds that officials of both superpowers possessed. Both the United States and the Soviet Union took turns with being on the offensive and the defensive. Able Archer 83 was truly an international arena of contestation in which both actors used nuclear war as a threat to gain internationally-perceived, general superiority. More informally put, Able Archer 83 was the final round in a nuclear, yearlong game of chicken.

Nate Jones managed to use the Freedom of Information Act to have the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush presidential libraries finally release and declassify a myriad of information from the late 1970s and all of the 1980s for viewing at the National Security Archive (NSA). Three years later, in 2016, his book *Able Archer 83: The Secret History of the NATO Exercise That Almost Triggered Nuclear War*, relied upon selected documents from the recently released archived boxes. From 2013 through 2015, Jones also published online via the NSA “The 1983 War Scare: ‘The Last Paroxysm’ of the Cold War” in three different parts, with the primary goal of underlining the multitudes of pertinent information being withheld by the U.S. government, archives, and intelligence agencies. Furthermore, even

⁶ In her book *The Reagan Reversal*, the historian Beth A. Fischer argued that Able Archer 83 was the catalyst of the sudden reversal in U.S. foreign policy under President Ronald Reagan. Although not pertinent to my own argument, this book is beneficial in understanding the many government officials and figures who held large roles at the time (during 1983 and during the end of the Cold War).

with the many sources now available, Jones still makes sure to subtly point out discrepancies that still exist because of the plethora of information that has yet to be declassified. He works to prove that the “Cold War turned hot in 1983” and that with more concrete evidence, “readers can assess for themselves the causes, risks, and lessons of the once-classified 1983 War Scare” rather than simply going along with the extremes of the Soviets “Crying Wolf” or the United States trying to force the Soviets to instigate nuclear war.⁷ Nevertheless, Jones is straightforward in stating that even more information on the Cold War, particularly the end of the 1970s and all of the 1980s, continues to be withheld from common knowledge.

However, before Jones’s efforts paid off, there were several other historians who were working to produce information on the events of 1983. In her book *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War*, Beth A. Fischer looks at Able Archer 83 through the lens of U.S. foreign policy during President Ronald Reagan’s time. She argues that three main events (the KAL 007 plane shooting, “The Day After” TV film premiere screening, and the Pentagon briefing on nuclear war) plus the catalyst, Able Archer 83, moved President Reagan himself to take the first steps in seeking out a rapprochement and therefore reset the United States’ tone towards the Soviet Union from one of hardline superpower to one of increased dialogue/communications for the rest of the Cold War. She focuses on the Reagan administration’s “stated” policy, revealing the extreme difference in U.S. foreign policy towards the USSR from before and during 1983 to the beginning of 1984 and afterwards. And while Fischer avoids directly stating whether the United States or the USSR was to blame for the crisis, Gordon Barrass firmly argues that both sides were at fault in his article “Able Archer 83: What Were the Soviets Thinking?” In delving into the workings of the KGB and the GRU from 1981-

⁷ Jones, 1 & 4.

1983, Barrass manages to reveal that the discontent towards Reagan's foreign policies merely emerged from the instability of the Soviet government and the already existing fear/apprehension within the USSR that stemmed from the end of the second world war.⁸ Thus, the U.S. hardline foreign policy did not aid an already unstable situation. Unlike other historians studying Able Archer 83 and the end of the Cold War, Barrass is unique in bringing up the Soviets' fear of NATO's Pershing II and Gryphon (nuclear missiles), resulting in the Soviet verbal attack on the "Euromissiles" threatening world peace.⁹

A renowned historian on the Cold War and currently a faculty member of the Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Hal Brands explains in his book *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* that it is necessary to look at the bigger picture in the United States. He states that the paranoia and fear among American government officials and the general public came from the image of American greatness being in decline, and this stemmed from both the events of 1979 and a decade's worth of bad events. Brands argues that the Cold War itself produced the constant American fear of Soviet supremacy and nuclear war, in turn leading to the realization that the United States had placed itself in a position of power with no assistance from anyone (he uses the term "unipolar" to describe this position). While Brands also recognizes that the Cold War was completely changed as a result of the decisions made by President Reagan and President Gorbachev, he does not suggest that these decisions were in conjunction with the events in the second half of 1983.

⁸ Barrass, Gordon. "Able Archer 83: What Were the Soviets Thinking?" (*Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, vol. 58, no. 6, 2016, pp. 7–30. *Taylor & Francis Online*), 12-17.

⁹ Barrass, 11.

Rick Perlstein also takes an earlier stance in studying the Cold War in his book *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan*. Like Brands, Perlstein stresses the importance of the fear of American greatness being in decline. He argues that the 1970s and 1980s produced a fierce and renewed American patriotism due to the new fears of the United States losing its position as mankind's savior and the growing possibility of nuclear war. While the newfound patriotism came primarily from Nixon's fall from power and Reagan's introduction into the presidency, much of the sudden change in views had origins in past events (the roaring '20s, the Great Depression, World War II, the Cuban Missile Crisis, etc.). Perlstein reveals how President Reagan's life experiences, such as those in Hollywood, benefited him when it came to saying what the citizens of the United States wanted to hear. In working with and highlighting the loss of American trust in their president due to the Watergate Scandal (amongst other things), Perlstein portrays the 1980s as a precarious time in American history on the brink of an extreme cultural crisis. Nevertheless, like Brands, he does not see the events of 1983 as triggers or catalysts for the sudden change in policies at the end of the Cold War.

Most historians agree on the fact that Able Archer 83 was the closest that the world had ever come to nuclear war. Yet, in his article "When Truth Is Stranger than Fiction: the Able Archer Incident," Arnav Manchanda contends that the importance of Able Archer 83 was not that it was the closest the world had ever come to nuclear altercations, but rather the very reason for this belief. Manchanda acknowledges that the Soviet response to the NATO military exercise of Able Archer in 1983 was a defensive and pre-emptive strike.¹⁰ Therefore, the accumulation of President Reagan's hardline policy toward the USSR, American rearmament (even though

¹⁰ Manchanda, Arnav. "When Truth Is Stranger than Fiction: the Able Archer Incident" (*Cold War History*, vol. 9, no. 1, Feb. 2009, pp. 111–133. *Taylor & Francis Group*), 111-112.

disarmament had been proposed and signed off on between the two powers), and NATO missile deployment seemed to have made the USSR truly believe that a Western nuclear attack was imminent. Similar to Brands, Manchanda argues that the fear and paranoia of both the USSR and the USA overrode all sense—even that of NATO’s leadership; Manchanda also references Fischer to depict the shift from détente to confrontation to a swift reversal in foreign policy because of Able Archer 83. Correspondingly, Wojtech Mastny confronts the fact that most historians and government officials do not actually know how close the U.S. and USSR came to a nuclear war in 1983 because nobody knows the exact happenings in the last three months of that year. In his article “How Able Was ‘Able Archer’?,” Mastny looks at overarching themes of the Cold War, admitting that it was almost natural to believe that something catastrophic was imminent, hence the fear dispersed throughout the world. He also argues that as a result of NATO’s many closely-guarded secrets, a misunderstanding was bound to occur, be it through the withholding or divulging of discovered top-secret information on the part of any party. Mastny takes a unique approach in studying 1983 for what “failed to happen,” while also unoriginally stating the climax of the “second Cold War” came out of 1983.¹¹

On the other hand, in *War Scare: Russia and America on the Nuclear Brink*, Peter Vincent Pry, a retired CIA officer, confronts the stereotype of intelligence officers and professionals knowing more about the behind the scenes of a possible Russian nuclear attack by hinting that intelligence officers in the CIA were required to withhold information on the near nuclear war in the 1980s—a crisis comparable to the Cuban Missile Crisis—from most policy makers and the general public.¹² Plus, this was not simply because Able Archer 83 was

¹¹ Mastny, Wojtech. “How Able Was ‘Able Archer’?” (*Journal of Cold War Studies*, 1 Jan. 2009, pp. 108–123. MIT Press), 109.

¹² Pry, Peter Vincent. *War Scare: Russia and America on the Nuclear Brink* (Praeger, 1999), Introduction.

classified. Unlike many historians of the time, Pry works with the Russian point of view (government officials, intelligence officers, policy makers, etc.) in order to set a scene in which fear is prevalent on both sides, resulting in paranoia, distrust, and very little dialogue / communication. Similarly, Len Scott acknowledges in his article “Intelligence and the Risk of Nuclear War: Able Archer-83 Revisited” that both the United States and the Soviet Union were at fault for almost causing a catastrophe since both parties came into the year set against one another with President Reagan critiquing the détente and arms control and the Soviet Union on edge as a result of the international movement of nuclear weapons by Allied powers. Scott recognizes that while the general public might have been unaware of the nuclear war scare produced by Able Archer 83, the event truly did affect the government officials of both the United States and the USSR.

Able Archer 83 could have turned into the first ever nuclear war, producing drastic results. I stand behind the camp that states that Able Archer 83 was the final straw and the catalyst in bringing about a much-needed change in U.S. foreign policy towards the USSR (from one of hardline and pressuring to one of dialogue/communications and true nuclear arms reduction). 1983 itself was extremely complicated, particularly beginning with Reagan’s introduction of SDI (Strategic Defense Initiative) through his “Star Wars” speech in March of that year. Ironically, it resulted in a yearlong war scare even without Able Archer 83, one of the most dangerous situations to international peace at the time. Further investigation of Nate Jones’s argument that there still continues to be discrepancies in what is generally known about 1983 will appear in this paper, as well as the introduction of new perspective through the idea that Able Archer 83 was an international game of “chicken” with nuclear war and weaponry in mind.

It is unclear who would have “won” the game, considering the fact that the nuclear game could have easily backfired on all participants and even those not participating.

KAL 007 – The Penultimate Round and Extreme Discrepancies

Korean Airlines Flight 007 (KAL 007) was a commercial flight shot down on September 1, 1983, when it entered Soviet prohibited airspace. The event is essential to this study since it is the perfect example of the second to last round of the game of chicken gone wrong. On one hand, James Oberg explains that KAL 007 was an hour late in crossing the coast of Alaska, the “[Inertial Navigation System] never took command of the autopilot, and the plane continued on the magnetic heading selected just minutes after takeoff for only the first leg of the journey.”¹³ Therefore, based on his own in depth research, Oberg reached the opinion that “Either the crew forgot, or they manually engaged the INS when they were too far off the course it was automatically computing.”¹⁴ This would explain why the plane had been flying for so long in Soviet airspace; however, had anything been done to fix an “accident” or “manually [engage] the INS, it would have shown up on the radar tracking the plane’s movements.”¹⁵ Thus, the discrepancies are introduced: whether or not pilots and airline attendants fixed their mistake, whether or not the Soviets truly made contact (verbal or electronic) with the plane, whether or not it was an accident on the part of the airline, and so on. KAL 007 was provocative in the eyes of both the United States and the USSR; it was a concrete representation of the second to last round of chicken. In this case, the plane did not back out of the airspace and the Soviet military/controllers eventually chose to shoot.¹⁶

¹³ Oberg, James. “KAL 007: The Real Story” (*American Spectator*, October 1993, Vol. 26 Issue 10, p37. 6p.).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ However, the question then becomes who was the winner of this round of the nuclear game of chicken? Did anyone win? Additionally, there appears to be evidence explaining both the innocence and the guilt of KAL 007, making it extremely difficult to discern what is propaganda and what is fact (hence, the discrepancies).

Stepping back for a moment, once KAL 007 was in Soviet airspace and did not look as if it was going to try and move out for good, Soviet air defense forces were on constant alarm for many, many hours as can be seen “by the transcripts of military command channels.”¹⁷ The fact that the plane could have been a commercial flight never crossed the minds of the officers, “although some officers raised doubts, and pointed out that it was a very stupid intruder to be flying straight and level for so long.”¹⁸ Inquiries were made to Soviet civilian traffic control agencies, no one technically checked commercial air radar scopes, and it was reported that no civil flights were expected to be entering Soviet airspace. “Sporadic equipment failures and geographic ‘masking’ made precise tracking impossible, and several times the ground controllers directed interceptors onto the wrong course.”¹⁹ Therefore, it is not surprising that KAL 007 put the Soviets on edge—not only were all the Soviet tracking mechanisms, receptors, and interceptors not working, but they were also caught off guard because they truly believed that if an intruder were to enter their airspace, the intruder(s) would have either been even more secretive or more forthright. Nevertheless, they unusually chose not to look more closely into whether or not it was a civilian plane.

Without more release of information, such as the release of the U.S. Secretary of Defense’s perspective and documentation on KAL 007, a great deal of uncertainty and inconsistencies will remain around this event. However, a roadblock is reached since most everything pertaining to Caspar Weinberger (U.S. Secretary of Defense from 1981 – 1987), except certain diary entries and interviews, remains under extreme classification. The exact discrepancies from the Soviet standpoint on KAL 007 can be seen in the following chart

¹⁷ Oberg, James.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

assembled by researchers Douglas M. McLeod and Bob Craig; it is laid out to show the number of documents not found per discrepancy as well as to show the number of accessible documents per discrepancy (falling into the categories of “Pro-Soviet”, “Neutral”, or “Pro-USA”):²⁰

TABLE ONE				
Number of stories containing pro-Soviet, pro-U.S., and neutral presentations of each discrepancy (N=705)				
<u>DISCREPANCIES*</u>	<u>NOT FOUND</u>	<u>PRO-SOVIET</u>	<u>NEUTRAL</u>	<u>PRO-USA</u>
		<u>(YES)</u>		<u>(NO)</u>
Plane purposely flew over U.S.S.R.	445	157	32	72
Plane's lights were off	657	38	6	4
Third party blamed for not warning 007	629	69	3	5
Soviets didn't know it was commercial airliner	626	47	11	22
Soviets confused by other spy plane	629	65	4	8
Soviet action was acceptable	348	59	16	283
Soviets attempted to guide plane down	646	46	4	9
Soviets attempted to warn the plane	592	92	13	9
*The discrepancies are phrased in a form which resembles the pro-Soviet position.				

The peculiarities of the situation might have seemed obvious at that point in time. “Air Force intelligence dissented at the time of the incident, and eventually US intelligence reached a consensus view that the Soviets probably did not know they were destroying a civilian airliner;”

²⁰ Craig, Bob and McLeod, Douglas M. “Understanding Discrepancies in International News Coverage of the KAL 007 Airline Incident”, (22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, 70th, San Antonio, TX, August 1-4, 1987), 17.

yet, this did not make acceptable the actions taken by the USSR.²¹ Plus, there are a plethora of stories missing from this event, reminding historians and the general public that not all the facts are present. Furthermore, no details are added to the discrepancies, making them extremely general. For instance, Soviet controllers *did* try to warn the plane; however, what remains unmentioned is that these controllers tried to send an electronic warning, and when no response came back, they simply gave up. The next step should have been direct, verbal contact with the plane, and yet, no records show this happening. This shows the true tension caused by the game of chicken between the U.S. and USSR and the reality of KAL 007 being the penultimate round. If KAL 007 had gotten slightly off course, there were things in place that should have fixed the plane's course right away, and the flight officials should have been more aware. Had the Soviets wanted to avoid shooting at all costs, verbal contact could have been made with the flight, but this did not occur. Ultimately, both sides wanted to see how far each would go, and unfortunately it did not end well.

Benjamin Fischer's work on finding fact within the overarching, publicly-promoted belief goes to show that no matter what a discrepancies chart might find, it remains that some things were hidden by both sides so as to indirectly and subtly create a false image around the situation. The problem was that

The charge should have been criminally negligent manslaughter, not premeditated murder. But the official US position never deviated from the initial assessment. The incident was used to keep up a noisy campaign in the UN and to spur worldwide efforts to punish the USSR with commercial boycotts, law suits, and denial of landing rights....

²¹ Fischer, Benjamin. "A Cold War Conundrum: The 1983 War Scare in U.S.-Soviet Relations," (CIA *Studies in Intelligence* Article, Undated, Circa 1996, pages 61-73, found in Nate Jones's book *Able Archer 83: The Secret history of the NATO Exercise That Almost Triggered Nuclear War*), 67 (Jones, 187).

These various efforts focused on indicting the Soviet system itself and the top leadership as being ultimately responsible....²²

On the other hand, as previously stated, the Soviet controllers could have avoided shooting down the plane had they, firstly, contacted the plane through verbal contact since the electronic contact did not seem to work, and, secondly, simply used certain surveillance equipment that could have hinted at the probability and reality of KAL 007 being a civilian plane. In not doing so, the Soviets showed that they were putting their foot down when it came to “accidents”—they did what they had to do to protect their country and remind others of their capabilities.²³

Moreover, variations on what occurred draws attention away from what both sides were playing at—seeing which side would back down first. With this in mind, it is clearly difficult for either side to understand what was bluff and what was truth. The Soviets had set up Operation RYAN, an intelligence collection made up of the KGB and the GRU working together to keep an eye on the suddenly real possibility of a surprise U.S. nuclear attack. Considering the fact that it had been in action since 1981 when the new administration under Reagan was formed, it should not be shocking that by 1983, most individuals in the USSR were on the edge of their seats and truthfully believed that anything out of place could mean the start of a nuclear war.²⁴

Interestingly, an article was published in the “Pravda” on KAL 007, pointing out the oddity of the situation, though not reaching towards the extremity of it prodding potential nuclear war.

Rather, it argues that “Korean Airlines (KAL) flight 007 was part of a U. S. intelligence scheme

²² Fischer, 67 (Jones, 187).

²³ This said, it would appear that while the Soviet intention was to showcase their capabilities, the effects of shooting down the plane without following through on all protocol was not thought through. True, shooting down KAL 007 after flying in Soviet airspace for more than an hour shows an unflinching protocol; however, at a time when nuclear war was very possible, it could have easily escalated to reasoning for the start of war.

²⁴ Fischer, 62 (Jones, 182).

to collect reconnaissance information on Soviet military forces in Southeast Asia. The U.S. alleges that KAL flight 007 flew over the Kamchatka Peninsula in Soviet territory, was intercepted by Soviet fighters over Sakhalin Island, shot down, and crashed into the sea.”²⁵

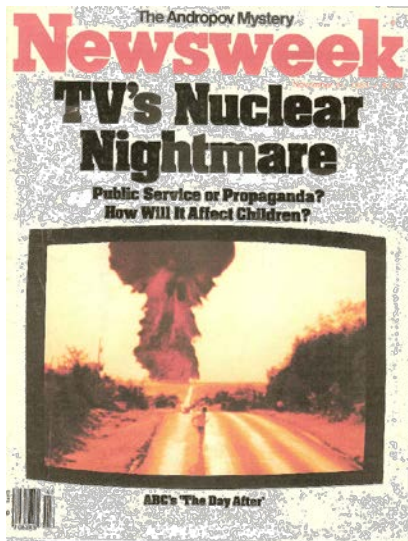
Plainly put, it is nearly impossible to understand what occurred since both sides seem able to produce some form of evidence convicting the other; nevertheless, KAL 007 is significant in that it not only shows the results of the second to last round of nuclear chicken, but it also reveals the extent which both the U.S. and the USSR would go to keep up an image of superiority and being in the right. As the former Soviet Head of General Staff Marshal, Sergei Akhromeyev, acknowledged in an unpublished interview from 1990, after all, “This was the middle of the Cold War.”²⁶

²⁵ Text of an article in the Soviet newspaper "Pravda". "What Lies Behind The Incident", Central Intelligence Agency, 6 Sept. 1983, U. S. Declassified Documents Online, [tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5SL3D9](https://tinyurl.com/tinyurl/5SL3D9).

²⁶ Akhromeyev, Sergi, former Soviet Head of General Staff. Unpublished interview from 10 Jan. 1990, Princeton University, Mudd Manuscript Library, Don Oberdorfer Papers 1983-1990, Series 1, Soviet Interviews, 1990, found published online on NSA site in Jones's three parts on the last decade of the Cold War, 7.

The Day After and The Briefing

Directed by Nicholas Meyer, *The Day After* ABC TV movie technically aired on November 20th, 1983, after *Able Archer 83* had ended; however, President Reagan had an advance, private screening of the film on October 10, 1983.²⁷



²⁷ The bottom three posters were promotional and made for *The Day After* ABC TV Movie. The top two images come from the film itself.

The TV movie shows the days leading up to a nuclear strike on the United States by the Soviet Union, the nuclear strike itself, and the aftermath specifically around the Kansas City area. “The Soviet Union commences a military buildup in East Germany to intimidate the U.S. and NATO into withdrawing from West Berlin. The situation deteriorates rapidly, with unheeded ultimatums erupting into a shooting war that rampages across Western Europe, then quickly goes all-out nuclear after tactical nuclear weapons are employed.”²⁸ Raw footage was mostly used for the nuclear explosions and blasts, and Meyer did not shy away from the grotesque radiation sickness that hit all the people in the United States. There is no hope after the nuclear strike and no contact can be made among people scattered across the United States. The government sent out a radio message insinuating that everyone was on their own, and thus the film shows how it slowly becomes every man for himself. The final scene of the film is no less disturbing, with a man kneeling in the rubble of what was once his home, looking up into the sky, surrounded by heat and radiation, his hair almost all fallen out. *The Day After* ends with the following words: “The catastrophic events you have witnessed are, in all likelihood, less severe than the destruction that would actually occur in the event of a full nuclear strike against the United States.”²⁹ As a result, it was very controversial, and, even though a war scare was already occurring in 1983, the movie pushed the public and leaders/government officials to a new level of fear. *The Day After* indirectly criticized U.S. hardline policy and even the constant need for superiority in its depiction of the normal U.S. citizen having to deal with the consequences resulting from decision making of leaders.

²⁸ *TV Tropes*, “The Day After (Film)”, tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Film/TheDayAfter.

²⁹ *The Day After*, directed by Nicholas Meyer, 1983.

The lack of “government” and “government officials” in the film implies that when it came down to the nuclear game of chicken, it would not just be the leaders getting hurt but rather the oblivious citizens of the country. Two taglines promoting the film are as follows: “They told us it would be impossible to make this movie. They told us it would be impossible for you to watch it. We hope nothing is impossible”; “The most watched television movie in history. Tonight, relive the story of a day beyond imagining.”³⁰ Whoever the “They” was, Meyer met his goal of showing that nuclear war was not impossible, that it was more than likely at the time. And so, while *The Day After* should not be considered as any round in the game of chicken, it stands to be a warning for the U.S. through the U.S. film industry; still, the fact that the movie nearly depicts the exact layout of what would have occurred had nuclear war really started as a result of Able Archer 83 is jarring. Many historians believe that the movie greatly frightened President Reagan, saying that it “deeply depressed” him. The issue with this, though, is that President Reagan saw it in October before the exercise was to start. True, U.S. officials backed out of participation in Able Archer 83, but Reagan made no move to not have the exercise run.

Furthermore, President Reagan’s supposed fear is taken from his diary entry written after seeing *The Day After*. This entry makes it quite apparent that his “fear” was interpreted and, possibly, exaggerated; President Reagan wrote, “It’s very effective & left me greatly depressed. So far they haven’t sold any of the 25 spot ads scheduled & I can see why. Whether it will be of help to the ‘anti nukes’ or not, I can’t say. My own reaction was one of our having to do all we can to have a deterrent & to see there is never a nuclear war.”³¹ Though Reagan takes the time to

³⁰ IMDb, “The Day After (TV Movie 1983)”, IMDb.com, www.imdb.com/title/tt0085404/.

³¹ October 10, 1983, Diary Entry by Ronald Reagan, (The Reagan Diaries Unabridged: Volume 1: January 1981-October 1985, edited by Douglas Brinkley, some information censored by request of the National Security Council, found in Nate Jones’s online published work, The 1983 War Scare: “The Last Paroxysm” of the Cold War Part I).

mention this film and state that it did move him, no emotive words are used in this entry. In actuality, this diary entry makes President Reagan appear hypocritical since it took more than the film to move him to “a deterrent”—in fact, it took Able Archer 83 itself. If anything, this diary entry appears to be an excuse trying to be made to back up the idea that President Reagan was truly thinking about changing foreign policy before Able Archer 83. In addition, it reveals the ways in which discrepancies can arise from twisted and exaggerated views of declassified information. However, this piece of evidence is not strong, further pointing out that Able Archer 83 was the final round of seeing which side would back away first, no matter the consequences.

Around the end of October, President Reagan “participated in a Pentagon briefing on U.S. nuclear war plans, the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP),” which was led by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff John Vessey *and* Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger.³² Explaining to the president the different locations and targets of the U.S. nuclear arsenal, the point became that the “United States was now targeting the Soviet leadership to a greater extent than it had in the past, in the belief that this increased threat would make the Kremlin less inclined to launch a nuclear first strike.”³³ In her research, Beth A. Fischer found that Weinberger and Vessey warned Reagan that whether or not the United States was to strike first, retaliation of any form would be inevitable, and the entire country was likely to be wiped out. Nevertheless, during a podcast meant to promote his new book *1983: The World at the Brink* (published in April 2018), Cambridge historian Taylor Downing states that although the officials

³² Fischer, Beth A. *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War*, University of Missouri Press, 2000, 120.

³³ Fischer, Beth A., 121.

at the briefing did say that most Americans would die from a nuclear strike, they also believed that the U.S. could fight a nuclear war and still come out of it alive in some way.³⁴

Based on Downing's findings, Reagan found this absurd. Other than these details, not much is known on the Pentagon debriefing because most of the documentation remains classified and top secret. In a declassified interview, though, Weinberger claims to have known nothing of the exact happenings of Able Archer 83; yet, the above mentioned Pentagon briefing on nuclear war would beg to differ. And so, discrepancies will continue to exist until nearly all the Weinberger files are declassified and released. Although President Reagan had avoided attending briefings of nuclear war for the first two years of his time in office, attending this specific meeting in October of 1983 proved quite vital. *The Day After* and this briefing had clearly pushed nuclear war to the forefront of President Reagan's mind, but nothing was done to stop NATO from carrying through with its exercise Able Archer. Again, the U.S. officials were well aware of what nuclear war could look like and what could start it, but no one did anything at the end of October to fix the situation. The game of chicken was still going, and until someone backed away, there could be no winner; apparently, the U.S. would not be the one to pull out first.

³⁴ Downing, Taylor, and Rob Attar, "1983: The Cold War Almost Goes Nuclear," (*History Extra Podcast*, Immediate Media, 26 Apr. 2018).

Able Archer 83 – The Final Round

Had neither side backed down in the penultimate round of nuclear chicken, Able Archer 83 could have easily led to nuclear war. It simulated “a slow escalation from a conventional military response to a chemical and limited nuclear strike and finally into a full nuclear war.”³⁵ From November 2 – November 11, 1983, NATO’s attention was first directed toward preparing for nuclear war and then to making sure it did not occur as a result of its untimely preparation. During the end of 1982 and throughout 1983 leading up to Able Archer, President Reagan had sent marines and warships to Lebanon and military forces to Central America. “And on October 25, 1983, only one week before Able Archer began, the United States had invaded Grenada—for the purpose of ousting communist ‘thugs’”; plus, the replacement of Pershing I with Pershing II, the finalized testing of the Gryphon missiles (which had actually been sent out to foreign bases starting in 1982), the Kurdish rebellion in Iraq, KAL 007, the broadcasting of the ABC TV film *The Day After*, and the sudden Pentagon debriefing on nuclear war are just a few of the events causing and resulting in the climax of fear, paranoia, and unease.³⁶

Yet, KAL 007 stands as the penultimate round of the nuclear game of chicken because of its unflinching situation. Additionally, when NATO first introduced this exercise, the U.S. “president, vice president, defense secretary, and Joints Chiefs of Staff were slated to participate in the simulated nuclear attack.”³⁷ As previously stated, there is unfortunately no access whatsoever to any of Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger’s files pertaining to this subject and 1983 as a whole, making accurate comprehension of the Reagan Administration’s exact perspective on Able Archer almost impossible to discern—how could an individual completely

³⁵ Jones, 2.

³⁶ Fischer, Beth A., 125.

³⁷ Fischer, Beth A., 123.

understand without the politician guiding defense's thoughts and actions? At the last minute, however, the Reagan Administration backed out of these plans but continued to keep the simulation quiet. A buildup of anything by NATO would have triggered Soviet suspicions because it was an extension of some U.S. power, an extension that could easily place the U.S. right alongside to the Warsaw Pact.

And yet, certain oddities continue to arise as information from 1983 slowly becomes declassified and available for review. In a declassified CIA Studies in Intelligence article by Benjamin Fischer, "The 1983 War Scare in U.S.-Soviet Relations," Fischer mentions that the United States was partly in charge of Able Archer 83 which was an annual NATO exercise; however, if it was a NATO exercise, then NATO would be in charge, and secondly, it was said that the United States opted out at the last minute of being involved with this exercise, so technically only the Europeans were involved in the simulation; and thus, the discrepancies continue to unfold. Fischer further stresses that the "United States was in the midst of the largest military buildup in its history whose aim was to close a perceived 'window of vulnerability' in the mid-1980s created by US loss of superiority."³⁸ No matter the call for disarmament regarding both military and nuclear weapons, which the Reagan administration greatly promoted, neither side would be the first to follow through; disarming could show cowardice, the possibility of being weak to begin with, and it could reveal the loser of the game of chicken. Fischer, like a couple of other historians and officials, claims that the Able Archer was familiar to everyone, including the Soviets. The 1983 version included several changes, though.³⁹ First, "in the original scenario..., the exercise was to involve high-level officials, including the [U.S.]

³⁸ Fischer, 63 (Jones, 183).

³⁹ Fischer, 69 (Jones 189).

Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in major roles...with... appearances by the President and Vice President.”⁴⁰ Secondly, “the exercise included a practice drill that took NATO forces from the use of conventional forces through a full-scale mock release of nuclear weapons.”⁴¹ This would explain Beth Fischer’s findings, and it suggests that the Soviets were completely aware of this exercise, though not necessarily of the changes made to remove the U.S. Secretary of Defense, President, and Vice President from the simulation.

Blind-siding the Soviets in this way displays how serious and secretive the U.S. (and arguably NATO) was in order to achieve superiority. The above change also suggests that Able Archer 83 was not the first time that this particular simulation (Able Archer) was run; however, no documentation on the other times which the exercise played out is attainable or can be found. If Able Archer was in fact not a simulation practiced annually or every couple of years, then the USSR would have understandably been frightened and on the defensive as a result of movement that they could not have distinguished to be an exercise without warning from NATO. However, if the USSR was aware of this simulation, whether or not it was exercised annually or every couple of years, then being left unaware that the U.S. had withdrawn from the simulation might simply have been used as an excuse for suspicion; thus, the USSR would have had no right to prepare for a nuclear attack in response to what they knew to be a simulation if not for some suspicion that things had been changed, making the simulation more than just that. Nate Jones’s extensive research on Able Archer 83 allowed him to produce a summarized layout of the simulation itself, as summarized below:

⁴⁰ Ibid.

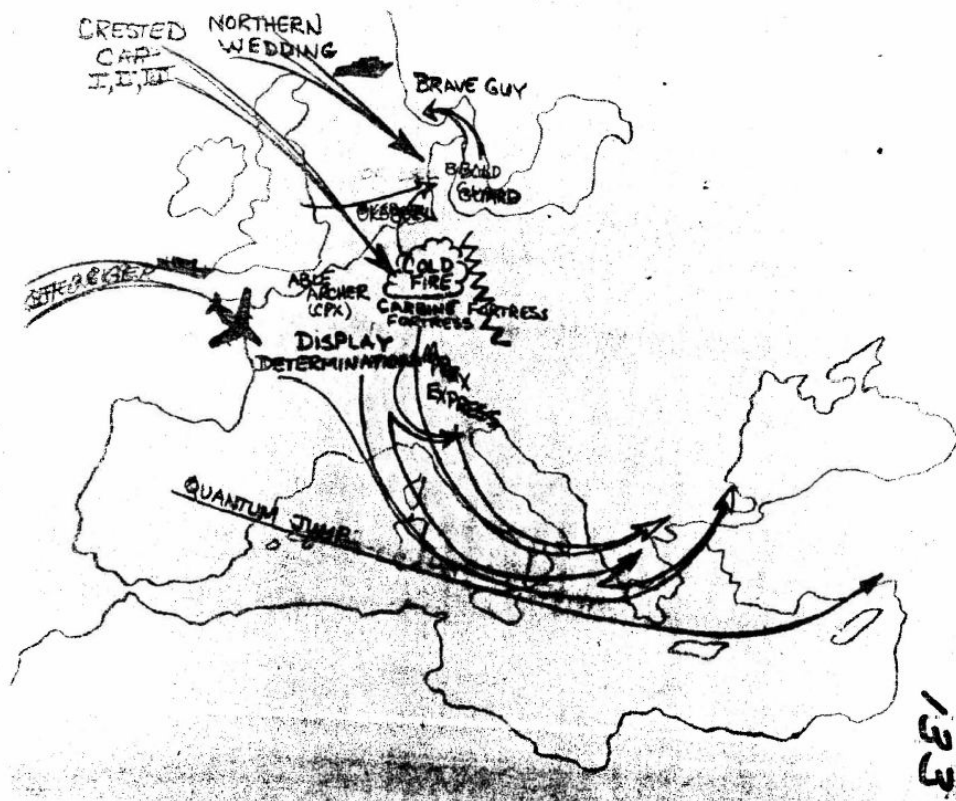
⁴¹ Fischer, 69 (Jones 189).

Ground war started to develop on October 31, and Soviets invade Finland first, followed by the invasion of Norway. NATO's European forces and bases had to stand against the Soviet's air and naval attacks. Next, the Soviets invaded Greece on land while attacking the Adriatic, Mediterranean, and Black Seas with their navy. NATO forces responded with strong resistance to the Soviet invasions, and so the conventional war shifted to unconventional war. By November 6, "Soviet forces had launched chemical attacks." NATO responded with chemical attacks as well, and the conventional turned unconventional war reaches Britain. "Unable to repel the Soviets' ground advance, NATO attempted to send a message to the Warsaw Pact via nuclear signaling—the nuclear destruction of one city in the hope of averting total nuclear war," which the Western nations gave permission to NATO to do. Since this did not deter the Warsaw Pact, the leader of NATO's military, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), called for a "follow-on use of nuclear weapons," and the United States and other Western nations "approved this request within twenty-four hours...." On November 11, the follow-on attack was performed, and caused an all-out nuclear war to break out. "Then, with nothing left to destroy, Able Archer 83, a NATO war-gaming exercise designed to practice the release of nuclear weapons during wartime conditions, came to an end."⁴²

And so, the extent to which this simulation was calculated, with the development of a past going back to June of 1983 and an actual accumulation of forces to fulfill this exercise, Able Archer 83 could have truly appeared to be preparation for a surprise nuclear attack if no warning was given to the parties not involved. The layout of movement during the simulation can be seen

⁴² Jones, 1-2.

in this map. The simulation was meant to “Demonstrate solidarity of NATO committed forces”.⁴³



Able Archer 83 appeared to be the final round in the nuclear game of chicken. Beth Fischer explains that beforehand, “Moscow wanted Washington to agree that neither side would introduce nuclear weapons into a conventional conflict. [Reagan] said that he didn’t think ‘any useful purpose is served in making such a declaration.’”⁴⁴ The basis of Able Archer lay in the notion of introducing nuclear weapons into a conventional war—one side was bound to do it, and so the “West” or rather the non-communists wanted to be the ones in control of nuclear introduction. And yet, in Jones’s summarized simulation, it is unclear who changes the war from

⁴³ *History of the 322nd Airlift Division, January 1982 - December 1983*, Volume VII Supporting Documents, Prepared by Edgar P. Sneed, Division Historian, Unclassified, Released under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 3-4.

⁴⁴ Fischer, Beth A. *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War*, University of Missouri Press, 2000, 125.

conventional to nuclear. It seemed to be a defensive response to a volatile situation; and yet, it looked offensive to the USSR not only because of its secretiveness and possible possession of active nuclear missiles, but also because it triggered the memory of Operation Barbarossa from World War II, during which Nazi forces surrounded and invaded the USSR. The USSR could therefore not be certain whether Able Archer was truly a simulation or whether Able Archer was a guise for a surprise—but nevertheless predicted—nuclear attack. During the simulation, specifically on November 10, 1983, U.S. Army Intelligence and Security Command Daily INTSUM reported that there was ““continued [Soviet]...missions to monitor NATO exercise Able Archer 83.”⁴⁵

With this knowledge, instead of sending a message to the USSR stating that they had nothing to fear for it was merely an exercise, the knowledge that the USSR possibly believed there to be an impending nuclear attack was filed away. According to the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board review, two weeks after the simulation was completed, “analysts noticed and reported fully armed MiG-23 aircraft on air defense alert in East Germany.”⁴⁶ Curiously, during a simulation meant to practice monitoring the potential for a nuclear war, the fact that the USSR actually *did* start to arm weaponry (both normal and nuclear) and aircrafts should have been a major red flag—but it was not. It then appears necessary to question how far the USSR would go to protect itself (in its own eyes) and to start the first ever nuclear war (in the eyes of U.S. and others), all of which goes back to the notion of Able Archer 83 being the final round in the U.S. and USSR’s game of chicken. Thankfully, neither side flinched or made the move to start the first ever nuclear war.

⁴⁵ Jones, 219.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Conclusion

1983's air of suspicion, paranoia, discrepancies, and the like can be highlighted by Able Archer 83, preceded by the unfortunate shooting down of flight KAL 007, revealing that at the time, this was the ultimate brink of nuclear war, which arguably resulted from an international game of nuclear "chicken" between the United States and the Soviet Union to gain the upper hand and internationally-perceived superiority. Both the U.S. and the USSR took turns being on the offensive and the defensive, emphasizing the need for open, straightforward dialogue. Acting as the penultimate round of chicken, KAL 007 shows miscommunication and lack of dialogue rising from paranoia, fear, and the desire to be number one, as well as the fact that neither side flinched away. 1983 was the climax of the Cold War because it truly pushed both the United States and the USSR to the brink of nuclear war and to thus end the game of nuclear chicken. Able Archer 83, as the final round this game, emphasizes the evident poor decision making on the part of both sides; seeing as the question of nuclear armament versus nuclear disarmament was going nowhere, the simulation worked against all parties in that it caused sudden arming of the immense array of nuclear weaponry, and its primary and only benefit arose in the form of finally forcing the reality and horrors of a nuclear war into the minds of both the leaders of the U.S. and the USSR.

More generally speaking, Able Archer 83 (as well as KAL 007) truly stresses the need for more documents, files, military exercises, etc., to be declassified, especially pertaining to the Cold War. In this sense, I agree with and support Nate Jones's belief, although his is more general and pertaining to all classified and secret files. Understandably, not everything can be declassified if politicians or military officials are still alive for safety, security, and privacy reasons; however, there is still too much confusion, paranoia, and misguided knowledge about

what was really occurring during the Cold War, specifically in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. By delving into events of that era and continuously sending letters to open certain boxes, as Jones advises, it will eventually make the point that the general public not only wants but also needs to know the truth, even if it reveals that the United States was not as innocent as citizens like to and are taught to believe. Today there is the very real issue with trusting what is known as fact and questioning what many have been taught is the truth based on provided information. If anything, the discrepancies revealed in this paper pertaining to merely events in the 1980s should suggest that there is a great deal of information and knowledge unknown to most people around the world. In the end, it is not only beneficial but also crucial that more files be opened and declassified in order for the most accurate truths to be shared, for miscommunications to reach an all-time low, and for responsibilities to be taken, all to prevent another game of nuclear chicken from being started and potentially leading to an apocalyptic, nuclear war.

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